



PROVIDING QUALITY SERVICES TO CUSTOMERS WITH DISABILITIES

Key to Quality Customer Service

The key to providing quality services to customers with disabilities is to remember that all customers are individuals. People with disabilities come in all shapes and sizes with diverse personalities, abilities, interests, needs, and preferences – just like every other customer. There are an estimated 54 million people with disabilities, or 20% of the population – the nation's largest minority group.

Below are some basic tips for interacting with customers who have disabilities. Keep in mind that in most cases, the best way to learn how to accommodate customers with disabilities is to ask them directly. When interacting with customers with disabilities, appropriate etiquette is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Listen and learn from what the customer tells you regarding his or her needs.

Serving Customers Who Have Disabilities

- Most disabilities occur after childhood as a result of injury, disease, or disorders (one out of every six disabilities is present at birth.)
- Two people with a similar disability may not be alike or have similar needs.
- Many disabilities are not apparent to a casual observer, and are sometimes called "hidden" or "invisible" disabilities. Examples are diabetes, heart disease, cancer, epilepsy, sickle-cell anemia, organ transplant, or emphysema.
- Some disabilities are variable from day to day. Some conditions are progressive, becoming more severe over time. Keep this in mind if you notice an individual who appears to be walking, talking or seeing fine one day, but not the next.
- Some disabling conditions involve pain or require medication or treatments that have side effects. This may be the reason why an individual with a disability exhibits restlessness, drowsiness, slurred speech, slowed reflexes, even irritability.
- Some people who are chemically sensitive experience uncomfortable or even dangerous symptoms in the presence of certain substances, such as scented personal products, cleaning products, and new carpeting or furniture. If necessary, move to a different location.

Serving Customers Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Get the customer's attention before starting a conversation (move into the person's field of vision or tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm).
- Identify who you are (introduce yourself or show your name badge).
- Look directly at the customer; face the light; speak clearly and in a normal tone of voice; use short, simple sentences; and keep your hands away from your face.
- Ask the customer if it would be helpful to communicate by writing or by using a computer terminal to type back and forth.
- If the customer uses a sign-language interpreter, speak directly to the customer, not the interpreter.
- If you telephone a customer who is deaf or hard of hearing*, let the phone ring longer than usual; speak clearly and be prepared to repeat the reason for the call and who you are.
- If you telephone a customer who uses a TTY, call directly by TTY or use the Telecommunications Relay Service. Consider purchasing a TTY.

* Someone who self-identifies as Deaf or Hard of Hearing may use either a voice telephone or a TTY. In either case, let the phone ring longer than usual.

Serving Customers Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision

- Speak to the customer when you approach her or him. State clearly who you are; speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Never touch or distract a dog guide without first asking the owner.
- To guidethe customer, let her or him take your arm by putting a C-shaped hand at the back of your elbow while following a half step behind.
- Offer assistance if the customer appears to have difficulty locating a specific service area. Be descriptive when giving directions; give the customer verbal information that is visually obvious to people who can see. For example, if you are approaching steps, mention how many and the direction.
- If you are offering a seat, gently place the customer's hand on the back or arm of the chair.
- Ask if the customer needs assistance signing forms. Offer to guide her or his hand to the appropriate space for signature.
- When dealing with money transactions, tell the customer the denominations when you count out change.
- Tell the customer when you are leaving; never leave a person who is blind talking to an empty space.
- Make sure the customer has picked up all of her or his possessions before leaving.

Serving Customers With Mobility Disabilities

- Put yourself at a wheelchair user's eye level. If possible, sit next to the customer when having a conversation.
 - Do not lean on a wheelchair or any other assistive device. Ask first before pushing someone's wheelchair.
 - Provide a clipboard as a writing surface if counters or reception desks are too high; come around to the customer side of the desk/counter during your interaction.
 - Offer assistance if the customer appears to have difficulty opening the doors.
 - Make sure there is a clear path of travel.
 - Offer a chair if a customer will be standing for a long period of time.
 - Never touch or distract a service animal without first asking the owner.
 - If you telephone the customer, allow the phone to ring longer than usual to allow extra time for the customer to reach the telephone.
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Serving Customers With Cognitive Disabilities

- Offer assistance with and/or extra time for completion of forms, understanding written instructions, writing checks, and/or decision-making; wait for the customer to accept the offer of assistance; do not "over-assist."
 - Speak clearly. Do not shout, exaggerate, or over-pronounce. Use a normal tone of voice and normal speed unless asked to slow down.
 - Keep your concepts clear and concise. Use precise language and avoid complex sentences. Sometimes it is helpful to break down complicated concepts or processes into discrete one-by-one steps and deal with them sequentially.
 - Be prepared to provide an explanation more than once.
 - A customer who has difficulty reading or writing may prefer to take forms home to complete.
 - Be patient, flexible, and supportive; take time to understand the customer and make sure the customer understands you.
 - Consider moving to a quiet or private location, if in a public area with many distractions.
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Serving Customers With Speech Disabilities

- If you do not understand something, do not pretend that you do. Ask the customer to repeat what was said, then repeat it back to the customer. Consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask the customer if this is acceptable.
- Be patient; take as much time as necessary.
- Try to ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate on what the customer is saying; focus on listening and communicating.

- Avoid barriers like glass partitions and distractions, such as noisy, public places.
- Do not speak for the customer or attempt to finish her or his sentences. However, if communication continues to be very difficult, you may ask permission to try to finish sentences or clarify ideas. If OK with the customer, then go ahead and use this strategy.
- If you and the customer cannot work out a communication difficulty, ask if there is someone who could interpret on the customer's behalf.
- Discuss private or personal matters in a private room to avoid staring or eavesdropping by other customers, as you would do for any other customer.

Remember . . .

- Treat the customer with dignity, respect, and courtesy.
- Listen to the customer.
- Help the customer feel comfortable.
- Maintain eye contact without staring.
- Offer assistance but do not insist.
- Ask the customer to tell you the best way to help.
- Provide access to facilities and services.
- Relax and deal with unfamiliar situations in a calm, professional manner.

Adapted from a July 1998 publication of President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (now the Office of Disability Employment Policy), www.dol.gov/dol/odep.

Note: *Inclusion in this resource list does not constitute endorsement by the Fair Housing Partners of Washington State, nor does omission imply non-endorsement. Our goal is to provide you with information on some available key resources. Please let us know if you are aware of a useful resource missing from this list.*

Contact agency:

King County Office of Civil Rights
400 Yesler Way, Room 260
Seattle, WA 98104-2683
206-296-7592, TTY 206-296-7596
www.metrokc.gov/dias/ocre/ho.htm